

History, nature lessons of Squaw unfold on free hikes

By Kathryn Reed

OLYMPIC VALLEY – Three golden eagles soar overhead. But from this vantage point of more than 8,200 feet, it's already a bit like having a bird's-eye view.

Dave, our guide on this free hike out of Squaw Valley's High Camp, has us looking up at the peaks, down at the flowers and out at the vast expanse of granite.

Like many who came for a winter to ski, Dave has been here 23 winters. While his main job is working in mountain operations, including a trip this month to Peru to find employees for the season, on this particular August Saturday he is taking a group on an hour hike.



A trip to the top of Squaw opens up miles of hiking trails. Photos/Kathryn Reed

It's part history lesson as we learn about the humble beginnings of the ski resort that opened Thanksgiving Day 1949 to becoming the unexpected host of the 1960 Winter Olympics to today's changes as evidenced by lifts being removed and others

being installed.

Those Games were the first to be televised.

“It was like a 12-day commercial for Squaw,” Dave tells us.

As Dave put it, this was back in the day when California was thought of as the land of oranges and surfing. It was not a skiing destination. It wasn't home to multiple winter Olympians.

It was the late Sandy Poulsen who helped name the legendary KT-22. It took her 22 kick turns to get down the mountain.

White pines and mountain hemlock are the predominate trees at this elevation.

With last winter not producing much white stuff, the wildflowers have been less than vibrant. Still, even this month some were dotting the landscape – yarrow, Indian paintbrush, mule's ear, pennyroyal, and fireweed.

Dave takes off some mountain sage leaves so we can find out it smells just like the spice.

Plenty of hiking opportunities abound. The later guided hike often entails going to Emigrant Peak (8,700 feet), but time does not allow for that on the first excursion. It's another 30 minutes from our turning around point, which is at the Gold Coast chairlift.

Dave says from Emigrant Peak – if it's a super clear day – the Bay Area peaks of Mt. Diablo and Mt. Tamalpais are visible.

Plus, the Pacific Crest Trail goes through the area. The Granite Chief Wilderness has numerous trails. Hikers can even reach High Camp from the village area, which would mean an elevation gain of 2,000 feet.

While we didn't work up much of a sweat on this cool summer

day, we still wanted to catch some rays by the pool and listen to the band. A bar at the pool supplies drinks, but just outside the gate is food at the café.

The pool is an ideal setting to relax. For those who want to keep playing, the High Camp area offers roller skating (ice in the winter) and paintball.

Things to know:

- Guided hikes leave from the grassy area just outside the High Camp building. Hikes are at 12:30pm and 2:30pm on weekends through Sept. 23, and on Fridays through Sept. 9.
- Cost for adults to ride the tram is \$29, to use the pool-hot tub is \$15, and to do both is \$41.
- Tram is free for downloading if you've hiked up there.
- High Camp Run (5K or 10K) and Pool Party is Sept. 15 beginning at 11:30am at High Camp. Cost is \$30 in advance or, \$35 that day.
- More info is on Squaw's website.

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